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EDUCATIONAL EFFICIENCY OF OUR MUSEUMS.

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THE development of museums within the United States during the past thirty years has been insignificant in comparison with the enormous growth of libraries and universities; and while our country now compares favorably with European lands in its colleges and libraries it is far behind them in its museums. A comparison between the museums of England and Wales and those of the United States reveals the weakness of our country in this respect, and it is apparent that our museums are only beginning to make themselves felt as factors in our system of education, whereas in Europe they have long been regarded as indispensable for the maintenance of culture and ideals of civilization.

One hundred and fifty-seven public museums are recorded in Baedeker's handbook of 1902, as existing in England and Wales, and in addition, fully two hundred and fifty private residences contain valuable and instructive collections which are open to public inspection and are practically museums. Also numbers of schools and colleges maintain museums; so that the number of collections available for public instruction is at least one and one-half times as great as in the United States.

Another feature of the situation in England is the presence of good museums in small towns and even villages. One-sixth of the English museums are in towns of less than 10,000 inhabitants, while one-third are in cities having less than 30,000. London alone has twenty-eight public museums which expend annually about \$500,000 in the purchase of specimens, certainly three times the amount spent for this purpose by all of the museums of the United States. Museums of the fine arts are both more numerous and more important in England than in America.

Seventy-six of the one hundred and fifty-seven public museums of England, or nearly one-half of the total number, contain collections in the fine arts, while only one-fourth of the public museums of the United States devote any attention to art. However, the chief differences which exist between European museums and those of America cannot be stated numerically. They are distinctions of quality rather than quantity, and so much remains to be done in the development of our museums in this respect that a brief statement of what appears to be some of the chief defects of our museums may not be unwelcome, if it serve merely to stimulate interest in and discussion of a subject which, in a few years, will become a much more important element in the educational problem of our country than is the case at present.

We have overlooked the fact that the vast foreign immigration of the past few years has brought among us a population accustomed to museums, and who seek the amusement and instruction which these institutions afford with much keener appreciation, respect and interest than is manifested by native-born Americans. Museums, Zoological and Botanical Gardens, Aquaria and Public Parks, are all appreciated more thoroughly and visited more frequently by foreigners than by our native-born, and we should take full care that the influence which they exert shall refine the thought and elevate the ideals of that foreign element which is soon to exert a great and all too little known influence upon our national destiny. About eighty per cent. of the emigrants to our country are between fifteen and forty years of age. Their ideals are already formed, our universities affect them only indirectly, and our libraries exert an influence upon them through the feeble medium of a language foreign to their thought. The Museum, the Zoological Garden, and the Public Park may still appeal directly to them; through sight they may come to know our land and to appreciate and respect its beauty, its history, and its principles.

But the ideal public museum is that in which the visitor who enters seeking mere amusement finds delight in learning. The museum is a school whose whole instruction is elective, and, in order that its teaching may be welcomed, it must be presented in a manner attractive to the eye as well as to the mind. The museum must be a beautiful place, displaying the utmost refinement of simplicity and elegance in architecture, with well pro-

portioned rooms, each devoted exclusively to one subject; and the quality of the specimens and the care displayed in their labelling and arrangement must comport in every way with the tastefulness and dignity of the building itself. The general subject of museum architecture and display is better understood in Europe than with us, and it has been reduced almost to a science in the valuable writings of A. B. Meyer.*

We should bear in mind that, in exhibitions designed for public instruction, the quality of the specimens is of far more importance than their quantity; and there can be no doubt that most of our museums would become more instructive to the public were they to withdraw a large proportion of their collections from view. Sir William Flower voices this sentiment when he states that the attempt to display every specimen is as absurd as if in a library every book were to be dissected, and each page mounted within a glazed frame for public inspection. Collections of local natural history might well be as complete as possible; but in all but the largest museums the displays of exotic specimens should be confined to an exhibition of important and interesting forms, which illustrate general laws of relationship, etc.

At the same time, the collections for study, which are to be maintained in storage, should be as complete and as accessible as possible. A reserve collection composed of excellent specimens should be made, and from time to time such specimens should be displayed, others at the same time being withdrawn from exhibition. In other words, the collection upon exhibition should be small, but it should be changed frequently.

Each case should be confined to the illustration of some one fact, or one law, or one group of related laws, and the purpose of each exhibit should be at once apparent to the average visitor. The entire exhibit in each case might be compared to a narrative, and the specimens to the sentences composing the story. An obvious reason should exist for the presence of each specimen within the case, and unnecessary, irrelevant or poorly labelled specimens should be as inexcusable as are poorly constructed and meaningless sentences in a literary production. It is sad to re-

* "*Über Museen des Ostens der Vereinigten Staaten*," I., 1900; II., 1901. Also "*Über einige Europäische Museen*," 1902; R. Friedländer & Sohn.

flect upon the lack of common sense in this respect which is evinced in the displays of most of our public museums. We all recall the thousands of irrelevant specimens which crowd the cases only to bewilder and fatigue the visitor, and to defeat the opportunity which the museum enjoys to teach objectively the laws of nature.

Although lack of judgment in the selection and poor taste in the arrangement of specimens are probably the chief faults of the displays in our museums, the inefficiency of the labelling in most of our museums is even more culpable because more readily corrected.

There is but little of educational value in labels which give merely the scientific names and the catalogue numbers of specimens.

Well illustrated descriptive labels must abound. Labels should be clear and direct, and should convey as much information as possible in an accurate, concise, and readable form. No label, of course, can be wholly satisfactory, for some of the chief desiderata in the composition of a label are mutually antagonistic. For example, a label must be clear, but, in order that the public may grasp its meaning, it must avoid terms whose meaning is precise to the man of science, but unknown to the general public. It must also be full of valuable information, yet as brief as possible. When possible, labels should be accompanied by colored illustrations and by maps showing geographical distributions of specimens. A good balance is obtained when both specimens and labels equally attract the eye, the one compelling attention to the other. Most of the descriptive labels of our museums are either too long to be readable, or are couched in terms too technical for public comprehension.

The superficiality of the instruction and its lack of direction are serious faults in our museums. Without for a moment overlooking the good which museums may do in merely affording a legitimate source of pleasure to the public, we conceive it to be more important that they should teach the laws of nature, and inspire respect for the underlying principles of truth. The museum should become a place into which the student may enter with full assurance that the utmost facility will be afforded him in his researches.

Specimens are dead, but thought will grow and live; and a

museum without books is almost as worthless as a museum without labels. Labels must needs be superficial, but books may at least give to the student all that has been made known.

It is shameful to record that twelve of the leading museums of the United States are expending on the average but one per cent. of their annual incomes upon books.

General libraries abound in our country but learned libraries are few, and many of them have been accumulated by Societies, which no longer flourish in the United States as they did a generation ago, and whose libraries can no longer be adequately maintained. One of the chief reasons for the position of usefulness and respect to which the museums of Europe have attained is, that they are intimately associated with great libraries. Not only should the museum possess a valuable and readily accessible reference library, but general study should be encouraged, by placing books upon tables near cases containing exhibits of a nature treated of in the volumes. Such books should be reliable general treatises, written in a style suited to popular comprehension. They should not be chained, and comfortable chairs should be provided near the tables, in order that the study of the books may become a pleasure to the visitor. In addition, a conspicuous label should be placed on each case, giving a list of the books within the museum library which relate to the subjects illustrated by the contents of the case.*

The museum should also contain study rooms, wherein specimens may be brought to the student and every facility afforded to him in his work; and teachers should especially be encouraged to use such rooms, wherein the resources of the museum upon any subject may be quickly gathered to aid in their discourses. The museum should also be prepared to lend study collections and duplicates to school-teachers and others engaged in educational work outside of the museum building.

But public instruction given by the museum must continue to be superficial and undirected, until well-trained public demonstrators are appointed who will, at stated intervals, accompany visitors, explain the purport of the exhibits and point out the laws which the specimens serve to illustrate. This duty is now intrusted to poorly paid and hence uneducated persons; but

* The Librarian of the Museum of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences has carried these plans into effect with remarkable success.

its proper performance demands wide learning, culture, excellent judgment and lucidity of expression, altogether comparable with the requirements demanded of our college professors. Such demonstrators should plan their lectures so as not only to meet the demands of the general public, but also to keep in close accord with the educational work of the schools in the vicinity of the museum.

When one considers the wide influence which accurate, interesting explanations of museum collections would have in increasing public knowledge and refining public taste, one wonders why it is that, in most of our museums, such duties are consigned to the spasmodic efforts of ignorant floor attendants.

The office of the museum demonstrator might well be called the "Information Room" of the museum, and he should be in readiness to assist all inquirers in their search for knowledge.

England has been fortunate in that such leaders as Huxley, Flower, Pitt-Rivers, and others have aroused intelligent and wide-spread interest in her museums. America is unfortunate in that her own great student of the museum problem, Goode, left no active disciple to continue the work after his untimely death, and the subject has received almost no benefit from public discussion since his day.

The libraries of our country have received a wonderful stimulus to progress through the association of representative librarians, the founding of training-schools for library officials, and the publication of journals devoted to discussions of the problems which every active library must meet.

A similar association of museum curators and directors would be of incalculable benefit in improving our museums and rendering them useful in manifold ways to the people of our country.

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